CHAPTER 6: HAVING THE BALLS: REFLECTIONS ON DOING GENDERED RESEARCH WITH FOOTBALL HOOLIGANS[1]

EMMA POULTON

INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides my own reflexive account of the methodological issues and concerns that arose for me as a female researcher within the hyper-masculine subculture of 'football hooliganism'. Despite polemic academic stances, most scholars at least agree that the phenomenon is underscored by the psycho-social pleasures of violence that are experienced by the (predominantly) male perpetrators, territorial identification, a sense of solidarity and belonging, and especially 'hard' or 'aggressive' masculinity (Spaaij 2008). As such, the subculture of football hooliganism is a fertile site for the symbolic expression and validation of 'hyper-masculinity': an extreme form of masculine gender ideology, characterised by one or more of the following characteristics: insensitive attitudes toward women; violence as manly; danger as exciting; and toughness as emotional self-control (see Messerschmidt 1993, Connell 1995/2005). Consequently, it may not be a comfortable site for a female researcher.

The principal aim of this chapter is to identify and explain the methodological challenges and concerns specifically (re)negotiated as a female academic researching this hyper-masculine subculture in order to provide some methodological strategies and field tips that fellow researchers may find useful to manage the performative presentation of self and navigate some of the complicated gender issues and related power issues that can arise during the research process. This is important for criminology and the social sciences more broadly because the sharing of good (and bad) practices and 'warts and all' admissions are all too

often absent from the usual research methods textbooks and 'impact-driven' research papers, which usually present 'sanitised' accounts of methodological processes and practice. Notable exceptions include the feminist scholars Bell and Newby (1977) and Roberts (1981). There is a real need to candidly reflect (both professionally and personally) upon the 'impact' on the actual researcher and the experiences and emotions confronted with while 'doing research' – which strategies 'worked', which did not and, equally important, how it *felt* when it went well or went wrong – and to share and exchange accounts with colleagues through other academic forums to help facilitate future studies. We are doing the next generation of researchers a disservice if we are not more frank and honest in admitting that doing research is not always a neat and tidy process of data collection, interpretation and analysis. In practice, it can sometimes be 'messy', requiring the researcher to dig themselves out of a hole, negotiate power relations, and engage in emotional labour. You may not always feel in command of a (challenging) situation; in fact you can actually sometimes feel rather powerless.

This chapter explains my reflections on the methodological issues that have arisen during an on-going trajectory of qualitative research with 'retired' football hooligans involving a suite of data collection techniques to explore their autobiographical narratives and 'post-hooligan careers'.[2] The key challenges and concerns for me were those that emerged from being a female academic: first, gaining access to the hyper-masculine subculture; second, entering and developing rapport within the subculture; and third, 'doing gendered research' in the hyper-masculine field (Poulton 2012). Drawing conceptually upon Butler (1990) and Goffman (1959) – and acknowledging previous studies by other female researchers working in male dominated fields (Sampson and Thomas 2005; Woodward 2008; Lumsden 2009, 2010; Palmer 2010) and with deviant social groups (Wiseman 1970; Jewkes 2005, 2012; Vaaranen 2004; Ward 2008) – I offer my own contribution to this body of work by reflecting

upon my experiences of doing gendered research within the hyper-masculine and deviant subculture of football hooliganism. Central to these experiences was a very conscious performative presentation of my gendered self for my self-preservation, both physically and emotionally, in the gender incongruent field. It is my contention that doing gendered research (especially with deviant subcultures) can sometimes require the researcher (male or indeed female) to demonstrate that they have the metaphorical 'balls' to negotiate certain situations, power relations and emotions.

DOING GENDERED RESEARCH

Many social scientists conducting fieldwork experience dilemmas and difficulties in relating their own identity and personal culture to the field culture in which they are operating. The issue of gender arises because researchers undertake fieldwork by establishing relationships. This is done as a person with a repertoire of status markers – in terms of age, educational background, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation – together with their own beliefs, preferences and leisure interests. In particular, fieldwork is undertaken as men and women and so is a 'gendered project' (Lumsden 2009, 2010). That said, we must be careful to avoid the simplistic binary model of gender and appreciate the complexities of gender expression and identities. Gender should be recognised as a fluid variable, not the core aspect of our identity, but rather a performance: what we 'do', the way we act and present ourselves in different contexts and at different times (Butler 1990).

Reflexivity has become recognised as an important research skill in the social sciences because it actively takes into account the effect of the social identity and social presentation of the researcher on whom and what is being investigated (Gertsi-Pepin 2009). Moreover, reflexivity acknowledges and appreciates that the researcher and the researched are

embedded within the research process. Thus, our personal biographies shape our research interests, access to the field, relationships with the researched, and our interpretation and representation of the culture under examination. This is arguably more pronounced when there is gender incongruence between the researcher and the informants. Feminist scholars have been particularly prominent and insightful regarding ways in which status group membership impedes *or* assists with access and rapport (Horn 1997; Mazzei and O'Brien 2009; Lumsden 2009; Ramsey 2009). Female researchers generally appear to be more acutely aware of being situated within gendered spaces and of the gendered interactions within them (Gill and Maclean 2002; Woodward 2008), with male researchers more prone to gender blindness.

GAINING ACCESS TO THE (GENDERED) FIELD

Particular problems of entrée into the subculture of football hooligans have been well documented. Armstrong (1998) and Giulianotti (1995) both advocate the use of snowballing to establish gatekeepers and engender further subjects. Both acknowledge they were at a distinct advantage in that they were natives of the cities where they conducted their ethnographies and knew some of the hooligan firm members as schoolmates, prior to their formal research, through their lifelong support of Aberdeen and Sheffield United football clubs respectively. What they did not explicitly acknowledge was that they were male. This gave them a distinct advantage. Despite this omission, Giulianotti (1995, 13) registers his scepticism 'on the viability of female sociologists undertaking participant observation with football hooligan groups'.

I fully respect the thoughts of an experienced researcher in the field and for many years was resigned to the fact that, as a female researcher, the door to the subculture of football

hooliganism would always remain closed to me. Yet, having studied media representations of football hooliganism (Poulton 2007, 2008), I had often felt a bit of a 'fraud'. How could I offer an informed analysis and interpretation of media representations of football supporter behaviour or the subculture of 'football hooliganism', without experiencing it, or at the very least meeting some of the participants? However, like journalist and hooligan biographer, Caroline Gall (2005, 4), I found myself asking: 'But then where does a young, middle-class, female reporter [or, in my case, sociologist] from the Shires start when trying to gain entry into such an alien world?' (Gall 2005, 4) My gender and other status markers (such as my age, class and profession) were misaligned with their status group membership(s). Given the general dislike of academic 'boffins' (see Pennant and King 2005, 4) together with prevailing misogynist ideas about women within the subculture of football hooliganism (Spaaij 2008), being a woman *and* an academic hardly boded well for pursuing my ambitions to progress my research interests. This confirmed my resignation that the hooligan subculture was a world that would always remain closed to me as a female researcher.

That was until I received what could be seen as a slice of 'plain luck', which Giulianotti (1995, 8) suggests 'can have the greatest influence on who is prioritized for entrée'. This good fortune arrived via an email from a promoter of some 'retired' hooligans who were organising a series of 'events under the banner of 'The Real Football Factories LIVE', featuring some of the lads who appeared on the Bravo TV series' (personal correspondence, 7 February, 2008). The email outlined some basic details, suggesting the events may be 'a really useful experience for students studying Sociology and football-related violence'. I was invited to contact them if I was interested. My initial reaction upon receipt of the email was scepticism: I suspected it was a 'wind-up'. Experienced colleagues warned me to be wary and

not to respond. Nevertheless, my curiosity and the whiff of an opportunity got the better of me and I replied a week later expressing muted interest and requesting more details.

An email exchange ensued over the next few weeks, with the promoter seemingly very keen to sell themselves and attract my interest and/or 'business'. This culminated in a telephone conversation, first with the promoter and then with Chris, one of the retired hooligans, who had conceived the idea. My conversation with him lasted about 45minutes, which I took as testimony to how well it went. While I was trying to learn more about their project and ensure it was *bona fide* and would meet any ethics committee approval, it was evident that I was also being 'sounded out', both as a woman and an academic, and that I was being subtly tested, so I needed to 'impress' them. This was a complex strategic situation. Part of our discussion centred upon 'relations' between hooligans and academics. Chris claimed that the latter were 'up themselves' and that there was 'no relationship between the two' (i.e. academics and hooligans). This put me in a disadvantageous position, but I reminded myself that *they* had contacted *me* after all.

Throughout the conversation, I was acutely conscious of my image management and keen to make a good impression, while striking a balance between being professional and personable: I did not want to come across as a being a 'naïve woman' nor 'stuck in my ivory tower'. Fortunately, my knowledge of hooliganism and football more broadly meant I was in my 'comfort zone' to some extent. This seemed to help me and we had an interesting, open and relaxed conversation. I was comfortable using some of the vocabulary of the hooligan subculture and able to demonstrate my awareness of recent incidents of football-related disorder. I was also familiar with Chris' autobiography, which I told him I had enjoyed for its candour and humility: a rare feature in hooligan memoirs often characterised by formulaic

bragging and exaggeration. This was well received: Chris struck me as someone who sought approval and thrived off praise. Shortly after the phone call, I received an email from the promoter saying that I had 'made a good impression on Chris' and 'It has been a pleasure to talk to you today for both myself and Chris' (personal correspondence, 27 March, 2008). From these early exchanges, it seemed that some subtle 'ego-massaging' was going to be the way forward in developing some form of rapport and maybe gaining further access. Consequently, while not always entirely at ease with this personally, I admit that I adopted 'ego-massaging' as a professional strategy (or what some call 'power tactic') to this end. This mainly involved praise, reassurance and endorsement and sometimes taking what was said with 'a pinch of salt'. I saw this as a necessary part of 'research bargaining'.

Research bargaining (either explicit or tacit *quid pro quo*) is crucial to gaining access to the field and requires skilful negotiation and re-negotiation (Giulianotti 1995; Lumsden 2009). It soon became apparent in my interactions with the hooligans that our 'relationship' (and balance of power) was underpinned by an implicit 'bargaining' that could be mutually beneficial. First and foremost, they seemed to want endorsement from an academic institution to give their event series a form of integrity; they wanted to visit a university and present to undergraduate students, who they said frequently wrote to them for help with dissertations. In return, it appeared that the 'closed door' to the subculture of football hooliganism might be ajar. As with other research where gaining and maintaining access depends on good relations with gatekeepers and respondents (Sampson and Thomas 2003; Palmer 2010), I openly presented my interest in them and stated my purpose as wanting to find out more about their subculture to develop my research. They were happy with this and over the next few months I corresponded frequently with Chris via email, SMS and phone.

During this time, their project took a significant change of direction. Chris explained that one of his partners involved in the 'The Real Football Factories LIVE' was more involved with the active hooligan subculture and that his plans for a national tour 'glorifying their past exploits' conflicted with Chris' 'reformed' principles. Chris decided to break from the project and instead sought to develop an anti-youth crime project. During this 're-think' and the development of his new project, Chris would regularly contact me and I began to operate as a kind of unofficial consultant who they would bounce ideas off about website and presentation content, sources of funding, the barriers they faced given their criminal records, as well as seeking assurance and endorsement. Upon reflection, I believe that my status group memberships as a *female* academic actually *helped* facilitate these interactions and the development of rapport, in ways that male academics may not have been able to do. I also think our age gap may have helped because I was not considered a 'threat', either as a sexual predator or 'groupie'. In this way, my gendered self was a useful tool, not a challenge to the research process.

In return – as part of our unspoken research bargain – I gained an exclusive insight into Chris and his firm through the regular conversations we were now having, which came to serve as informal interviews. Five months after their first speculative email, I was invited to attend the official launch of their anti-youth crime project, which coincided with a pre-screening of a hooligan film. Finally I had my ticket, not just to the launch press conference and the cinema, but into the hooligan subculture. At last I was going to meet some hooligans. Chris was acting in the role of 'gate-keeper' and the door had been opened.

ENTERING AND DEVELOPING RAPPORT IN THE HYPER-MASCULINE SUBCULTURE

While my research with 'retired' hooligans is ongoing, to date my fieldwork experiences are perhaps limited compared with the time spent by Lumsden (2009), Palmer (2010) or Woodward (2008) in their respective male subcultures. I am certainly *not* claiming to have gained full entrée as a covert observer (Pearson 2009, 2012) or the status of the 'marginal native' (Armstrong 1998) or 'relative insider' (Giulianotti 1995), which reflect the former's immersed ethnography vis-à-vis the latter's more episodic ethnography. Nevertheless, I was still confronted by a need to 'get on' (McKenzie 2009), without standing out, arousing suspicion, or antagonising those within the group in any way, while ensuring my personal safety.[3] There are no explicit guidelines for achieving this, but it is of course imperative to try to establish a level of trust and rapport with those being investigated.

This can pose a real challenge for a woman in 'man land' (Palmer 2010, 433): how do you look inconspicuous when so many physical and social status markers (gender, class, generation and biography, signified by comportment, appearance, accent and dress) are incongruent? My field diary records my anxieties about 'what to wear' when meeting the hooligan firm for the first time at the film pre-screening, demonstrate my acute consciousness of and concern about both my presentation of self (Goffman 1959):

> What shall I wear? What do you wear to go and meet a firm of hooligans?! If I was a man, it would be so much easier: I could pick from any number of 'casual' designer labels and look to impress, or at least look inconspicuous! But what to wear as a woman? We're meeting at a pub and going to the cinema. Do I conform to 'emphasised femininity'? Do I power-dress? Neither suggestion comes naturally to

> me at the best of times and neither seemed appropriate today of all days with the prospect of my imminent company. I'm not a 'girly-girl'. Rarely had I laboured over what to wear – this was like going on a first date! – yet it seemed to really matter. I didn't want to attract any unwanted advances by dressing provocatively, but I was also aware of a need to look 'feminine', as I would be in the presence of men for whom that was important. 'Comfortable shoes' would almost certainly be associated with stereotypical ideas of being a feminist (lesbian) academic, which wouldn't go down well in these circles. I didn't want to dress too formally, but I wanted to look smart and at the same time feel comfortable and also assertive. So what's a girl to wear? I was annoyed with myself for dwelling over the issue, but I knew that how I presented myself was important. They'd be checking me out, in every sense. Finally, I opted for my fitted, short-sleeved, navy and white, gingham-check Ted Baker blouse, a pair of smart boot-cut jeans and a pair of mules, which revealed my painted toe-nails (Fieldnotes, 16 July 2008).

For Mazzei and O'Brien (2009), the female researcher is an active participant in how she is perceived and received by informants. They pose the question: 'You got it, when do you flaunt it?' and expound the concept of 'deploying gender' to build an intersectional thesis on the role of the researcher's status group membership for gaining access and rapport. They 'carefully select our attire, are conscious of our body language, and attune our behaviour so as to present ourselves as acceptable to the field' (Mazzei and O'Brien 2005, 379). While I deliberately opted to avoid 'flaunting it', my wardrobe choice inadvertently helped as an 'ice-breaker' from which I worked on developing a rapport with Dave at our first meeting, as my field-notes capture:

> ‘I like your shirt’, he said. Thinking his comment was a bit of an odd thing to say (was it a flirtatious remark?), I thanked him. At least my worrying about what to wear seemed to have worked. ‘It’s like mine’, he added, ‘You’ve got good taste’. It was then I realised that we were both wearing navy and white gingham-checked shirts. We both laughed. My labouring over what to wear had worked: it had at least broken the ice. ‘Actually we’ve got something else in common’, I ventured, ‘We’ve got a mutual friend: Barry “Chicken Run”, landlord of The Fox in Hertfordshire’. ‘Barry “Chicken Run?” You know “Chicken Run?” Yeah, he’s a good bloke him, gets up Upton Park, proper West Ham. So how come you know him?’ ‘My dad lives opposite The Fox; it’s where I come from. That used to be my local. My brothers still drink there’, I explained. Dave seemed really interested and animated. ‘What that cottage with the thatched roof?’ he enquired. We were starting to establish something of a rapport. As we sat talking, I noticed we, or rather I, was getting a few funny looks from some of the hooligans who had come to see the guest of honour: as if to say, who’s *SHE* commanding Dave’s attention? (Fieldnotes, 16 July 2008)

My labouring over what to wear is an example of active image management in the presentation of my [ethnographic] self (Coffey 1999; Goffman 1959). Further, while keen to establish a good impression and develop a good rapport with Dave, Chris and the other hooligan firm members, I was keenly aware of maintaining a balance in terms of the image I was wanting to project: knowledgeable and well informed, but not a ‘prim and proper’ University ‘boffin’; willing and able to have a laugh, but also an academic researcher who was there to do a job. I believe I achieved this image management, though this was a constant challenge that I had to (re)negotiate and I always felt that I had to be ‘on my toes’ and ‘keep

my guard up'. In this way, my image management was also underscored by an implicit power struggle.

For example, after the pre-screening of *Cass*, we returned to the pub, where Chris introduced to me to some of the 'faces' [reputed hooligans] from the firm: men I had read about and seen photos of in his autobiography. It was apparent Chris had briefed them on who I was; they referred to me variously as 'the researcher', 'the university woman', or (a name that stuck) 'the Doc'. One of them put me on the spot when he said: 'We've heard if you had balls, you'd be one of us!' I wasn't quite sure how to take this gendered remark. I still reflect on what this really meant/means about my character and how this sits with me, both personally and professionally. Something I must have said to Chris during our conversations must have given him the idea that, had I been a man, I would have the propensity to be a football hooligan like them. Such a comment certainly seemed at the time to be a kind of seal of 'approval' and 'acceptance'.

As Sampson and Thomas (2003, 174) note, 'being in a fieldwork setting and gaining initial access to a site is no guarantee of acceptance, much less trust or even popularity. Hard won trust and rapport can be quickly lost in the face of a perceived rejection or 'social snub'. This is something I experienced several months later when a misunderstanding arose over Chris' scheduled trip to my institution to give an evening presentation to our students. There had been much discussion over payment for this, with Chris' promoter seeking an all-expenses-paid trip (including travel costs and an 'appearance fee', rather than the standard visiting lecturer rate), which my institution refused to pay. A compromise was finally reached, but then a week before the visit, I received an email cancelling the trip due to 'work commitments'. In my return email I expressed my disappointment given that I thought we

had a ‘gentleman’s agreement’. This evidently caused great offence given the SMS text I then received from Chris, accusing me of ‘selfish’ motivations because I had ‘not got [my] own way’. He signed off: ‘It’s been very interesting and at times hilarious whilst studying you studying us’.

It is here that I sympathise with the ‘emotional labour’ experienced by Coffey (1999), Hunt (2009) and Lumsden (2009, 2010). This was the most challenging experience, mentally and emotionally, I had during the research process. The SMS cut me to the quick. I felt vulnerable and powerless. It made me question the ‘rapport’ that I *thought* we had developed. I felt naïve for thinking that as an academic, indeed as a female researcher, I could have believed that I had developed a ‘rapport’ with a hooligan. But wanting to set the record straight, I boldly decided to call Chris. My performative presentation of self was vital here for my self-preservation. Not only did I need to keep my key gatekeeper ‘onside’ for the future of my research, but I had genuinely begun to value his ‘friendship’ and wanted to resolve relations. This proved to be a very difficult conversation during which I was subjected to more insults and ridicule as Chris vented his mind. He was particularly agitated by suggestion he had broken a ‘gentleman’s agreement’. I had used this gendered term blithely, but he had taken it as a personal affront, as if I was challenging his masculine values of valour and honesty. This put me in an acutely disadvantaged position. Finally, after taking a rap and perhaps helped by some further ‘ego-massaging’ through my consumption of ‘humble pie’ and apologetic manner, we resolved the situation. The conversation was emotionally exhausting and I had to compromise some of my personal principles to preserve what I now knew was a very precarious professional relationship and power balance. Despite this, I took some solace and indeed pride from the fact Chris thanked me for ‘having the balls’ to call; an incongruous gendered phrase in the circumstances! I later received an email from the promoter:

> I think that you may have misunderstood some of what was said. We have never laughed or disrespected you either as a woman or an academic... We have always thought highly of you and will continue to do so… You have always given us the impression that you are an independent, intelligent, outgoing, happy and strong lady... We remain friends (personal correspondence, 28 November, 2008).

This email came as a great relief and was reassuring. It was also revealing about how my presentation of self was interpreted and a gauge of how I had been received, as a female academic, in 'doing gendered research', negotiating 'outsider' issues and in forging some form of 'rapport'. Reflecting upon gendered interactions also illuminates some of the internal dynamics of the subculture under examination.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS: 'DOING GENDER' IN THE HYPER-MASCULINE FIELD

This chapter reflects upon the experiences of being a female academic researcher in a hyper-masculine subculture, specifically football hooliganism. Applying existing ideas and experiences, together with my own, the chapter contributes to discussions of reflexivity in criminological research by addressing some of the omissions in the current body of work and advancing debates on the gendered nature of research and the performativity of gender, along with other status markers, in the presentation of (ethnographic) self (Coffey 1999). Consequently, this chapter is conceptually underpinned by the contrasting, yet I believe complimentary, work of Goffman (1959) and Butler (1990).

The chapter highlights some of the methodological challenges and concerns specifically (re)negotiated and managed as a female academic throughout the research process. For me, these were: first, those that emerged from first gaining access to a hyper-masculine subculture; second, entering and developing rapport in the subculture; and third, 'doing gender' in the hyper-masculine field. Central to negotiating these challenges was a very conscious performative presentation of self, sometimes for self-preservation, during the research process. In practice, this sometimes required demonstrating that I had the (metaphorical) 'balls' in terms of handling particular situations and negotiating power relations, the emotional labour this demands, and my overall (gendered) image management. However, being a female academic was not entirely problematic, as I had previously feared. Once I had gained access, these status markers were sometimes actually useful research tools that helped me develop a form of rapport with some of my hooligan subjects and encouraged more candid discussions, which male academics may not have been party to. In this sense, I was actually empowered.

This chapter calls for a lifting of the blinkers in social research, not just regarding gender blindness, but also in terms of acknowledging the complexities and disclosing the 'untidiness' of qualitative research practices and the emotional labour it can require. This involves greater consideration of the *real* nature of the research process and more frank admissions about the challenging and awkward situations that can arise, often presenting the researcher with an emotional rollercoaster of 'highs' and 'lows'. Lessons can be learnt from sharing 'what works' (and 'what doesn't) via 'warts and all' scholarship. This is vitally important for future researchers since this kind of advice and candid reflexivity tends to go unrecognised in the sanitised accounts outlined in traditional methodology teaching and textbooks. Likewise in

the vast majority of published research articles, which all too often present qualitative research as a clinical process with polished practices.

My intention is that reflecting upon and sharing my experiences and the emotional nature of my research will contribute to the existing body of methodological work by providing useful advice and guidance on the performative presentation of self – as well as support and encouragement – to other researchers, especially those doing gendered research, to help their self-preservation in the field. While the chapter is primarily concerned with (a) being a female academic researcher and (b) football hooliganism, the methodological issues it addresses readily transfer and can contribute to other criminological field settings. These issues are of relevance to anyone faced with gender incongruence between them and their informers, as well as anyone engaged in qualitative research with deviant, (quasi-)criminal or male dominated subcultures more broadly. In other words, any field where the researcher may be required to reconsider and negotiate their positioning, practices and performativity in their presentation of self.

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[1] This chapter is adapted from Poulton, E. (2012) '"If You Had Balls, You'd Be One of Us!" Doing Gendered Research: Methodological Reflections on Being a Female Academic Researcher in the Hyper-Masculine Subculture of "Football Hooliganism"' *Sociological Research Online* 17(4): http://www.socresonline.org.uk/17/4/4.html

[2] My fieldwork involved: in-depth interviews; informal interviews; social networking; and observation-as-participant in field-settings with a group of 'retired' hooligans, who were 'active' during the late 1970s to early 1990s. I had two main subjects, who acted as gatekeepers. For the purpose of anonymity, they will be given the pseudonyms of Chris and Dave, as will all other subjects mentioned. Both were in their late forties/early fifties and were recognised 'top boys' (leading figures) in their respective hooligan 'firms' (organised gangs).

[3] My own personal safety strategy when meeting with football hooligans is generally informed by common sense precautions and practices usually employed when meeting strangers (especially men) including: meeting in busy, popular places such as pubs and bars; ensuring that several 'appointment monitors' know where I am going, who I am meeting, the due meet time and expected time of completion; and keeping in regular contact with those monitors via SMS messages.